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ABSTRACT

A study tested responses of viewers (as opposed to news organizations and sponsoring firms) to video news releases (VNRs). Subjects, 81 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory advertising course, viewed a 30-second message about McDonald's and the Big Mac in a VNR format or an advertisement about the Big Mac special "Meal Deal" embedded in a videotape of a recent local newscast. Subjects completed questionnaires measuring the credibility of the information in the video. Results indicated that viewers assign significantly more credibility to VNR-based messages than to similar advertisements. Further, the level of credibility given to newscasts was a significant predictor of VNR recall. (Contains 14 references, 1 table, and 1 figure of data.) (RS)

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Do They Believe It When They See It?:

Video News Release Effects on Viewer Recall and Attitudes

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Do They Believe It When They See It?:
Video News Release Effects on Viewer Recall and Attitudes

Abstract

Prior research on video news releases (VNRs) has focused on news organizations and sponsoring firms, largely ignoring the news viewer. This study tested viewers' responses to VNRs in an experiment. Results showed viewers assign significantly more credibility to VNR-based messages than to similar advertisements. Further, the level of credibility given to newscasts was found as a significant predictor of VNR recall. Implications for future research into VNR use are discussed.

Do They Believe It When They See It?: Video News Release Effects on Viewer Recall and Attitudes

Introduction: Video News Releases (VNRs)

Video news releases (VNRs) represent the future of publicity in a video age. "For image-hungry broadcast news, the convenience of ready-to-use footage . . . lead[s] to increased exposure for . . . clients" (Boucher 1993, p. 1). Video news releases get clients on the news for considerably less than it would cost them to produce a comparable advertisement and purchase time.

Video news releases are the logical extension of the printed press release and both are used by public relations (PR) practitioners to distribute information to media organizations. One to three minute news packages are produced and sent to television stations carrying news programming. The average production cost for a VNR runs approximately $15,000 to $25,000 (Boucher 1993). Included with the VNR is "B-roll"--footage with natural sound and shots of experts answering questions. Stations can use this raw "B-roll" tape to give the story a local angle by using their reporters to seemingly ask the experts questions. Station-produced news stories and VNRs can be interchanged with negligible differences in video quality. Video news releases are sent to stations by mail, courier, or over a satellite feed (O'Dwyer 1992) at an average distribution cost of $6,500 (Boucher 1993).

VNR usage

Once the station receives the VNR, the news producer decides if and how to air the information. Over the past six years, VNR usage by news producers

has increased. According to a December 1992 Nielsen Media Research survey for Medialink, the service that arranges VNR satellite feeds to about 700 television stations in the United States and Europe, 100 percent of the 92 stations surveyed reported using VNRs in their newscasts. This figure is up from just two years ago when according to a 1990 Medialink poll, 86 percent of news directors said they used VNRs (Sonenclar 1991). A 1988 Medialink study reported 83 percent of news directors saying that they used VNRs.

As television news directors' use of VNRs has increased, so has the number of VNRs produced. In the mid-1980s approximately 500 VNRs were produced yearly, whereas in 1993 more than 4,500 VNRs were produced (Boucher 1993).

The increase in the number of VNRs produced and aired can be attributed to station staff and budget cutbacks, more news time to fill, and an increase in media competition (Trudel 1992). Video news releases are, however, "more likely to show up on stations in smaller markets than in larger ones" (Miller 1990, p. 6). One of the reasons for this trend is that "video news releases have provided small stations with a welcomed solution to their staffing and financial problems" (Careless 1988, p. 53). Video news releases allow them to compete more effectively with stations that have larger staffs and budgets. "It's not always physically or fiscally possible for a station to send a camera to an event, but," according to Tony Perri, co-owner of Perri Pharris Productions, "we can send them footage via satellite or on tape, and it's like they were there" (Boucher 1993, p. 1). This symbiotic relationship can provide relief for some stations. "Struggling in a fluctuating industry producers are seeing the advantages of making use of PR talent and resources" (Trudel 1992, p. 22). News producers want the help of PR practitioners who respect the producers' need to protect

their journalistic integrity and make their creative mark on all programming they oversee (Trudel 1992). Stations have even built video libraries by saving their VNRs and many report using VNRs as file footage (O'Dwyer, 1991).

But the tiny video packages do not get a warm welcome in all newsrooms. "Some television news directors would sooner admit to insider trading than to extensive use of" VNRs (Sonenclar 1991, p. 14). CNN assignments editor, Will King said that he absolutely refuses to use VNRs (Gentz 1992). Tim Gaier, news director at WLBZ-TV in Bangor, Maine, agreed. He said that no one should tell news directors what to use on the air. Most television stations have their own crew and network affiliation (Pavlik and Thalhimer 1992).

According to Annette Minkalis, senior vice-president/TV at West Glen Communications, New York, television news directors "might not like to admit it, because of all the backlash, but TV stations do air VNRs in one form or another" (Miller 1990, p. 6).

Should VNRs be identified?

Eric Rothschild, former president of the 400-member Canadian division of the Radio and Television News Directors' Association (RTNDA), said that news directors should inform viewers whenever they broadcast a VNR. Otherwise, "if you put it on the air and pretend it is your own product, you are leaving yourself wide open. And if you lose your credibility, it will have a direct impact on your ratings" (Careless 1988, p. 53). Minkalis disagreed. She said that "every once a while there's a story expressing outrage about newspeople using footage that viewers think was produced by a news station, when actually it was sponsored by a corporation. But it's no different from a printed press release.

They have the option of accepting or rejecting, editing or changing it" (Miller 1988, p. 6).

Minkalis presents a typical perspective of focusing on the level of the sponsor and the news organization. However, it is difficult to resolve the issue of credibility as no research has examined viewer reactions to VNRs.

Regardless of the conflicting views between PR practitioners and news directors, television stations do air VNRs in one form or another (Miller 1990). According to a 1992 Medialink and Nielsen Media Research telephone survey of news directors, producers, and/or assignment editors, stations' use of VNRs continues to steadily increase. Twenty-three percent reported that they their usage of VNRs had increased. Fifty-two percent said that their usage had remained the same. And, according to the survey, 75 percent of the news directors received over six VNRs a week.

Example of leading VNRs

A VNR which covers a hot topic can reach huge audiences if it is well produced, properly distributed, and promoted. Viewership can be as high as 50 million for some VNRs. Examples of 1993's most successful VNRs are on Medialink's Top 10 list. The list represents the VNRs that garnered the most airings and largest viewing audiences on television news programs nationwide of the more than 2,000 distributed and measured by Medialink. The airings were confirmed by Nielsen Media Research and Radio TV Reports. "The mix of VNR topics -- from breaking consumer news, to medical, scientific and high-tech announcements, to entertainment news -- once again underscores the value and effectiveness of video public relations," said Medialink President Laurence

Moskowitz. "Overall VNR results continue to rise, and the performance of the most successful project continues to be stunning" (Business Wire, Inc. 1994, p. 1).

Topping the list was Pepsi Cola's series of four VNRs, produced by Robert Chang Productions, New York, about the Diet Pepsi syringe hoax. The VNRs were seen by more than 500 million viewers on 3,170 station airings during several days in June. The first VNR alone was seen by 297 million viewers. Second place went to the fusion energy VNR produced by Silicon Valley Productions for the Princeton University Plasma Physics Laboratory. The VNR was seen by 56.9 million viewers on 197 station airings. Third on the list was the VNR announcing the Time-Warner and U.S. West venture to create an information superhighway. The VNR, produced by Broad Street Productions, New York, was seen by 49 million viewers on 129 station airings. The VNR of the Cannes opening of Columbia Pictures film, "Last Action Hero," placed fourth with 43.7 million viewers on 192 station airings. Fifth place went to the VNR showing the production of Shaquille O'Neal's first Pepsi Cola commercial. The VNR, also produced by Robert Chang Productions, was seen by 38 million viewers on 169 station airings.

The second half of the list was topped by McDonald's VNR, produced by Golin Harris Communications, Chicago, which featured Michael Jordan and Larry Bird appearing in a Superbowl television commercial. The VNR was seen by 33.3 million viewers on 173 station airings. Seventh place went to another Golin Harris production which celebrated the 25th anniversary of McDonald's "Big Mac" sandwich. The VNR was seen by 33.2 million viewers on 267 station airings. Eighth on the list was the announcement of the opening of MGM's grand resort and casino in Las Vegas. The VNR, produced by Perri Pharris Productions, California, was seen by 27.4 million viewers on 122 station airings.

The series of VNRs, produced by Disneyland/Walt Disney World Publicity, on the theme parks' "Worldwide Kids' Party" placed ninth with 26.5 million viewers on 117 station airings. Ending the list was the new diabetes study VNR, produced by Kalish Communications for the National Institute for Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, Maryland, with 24.4 million viewers on 104 stations airings.

VNRs as a promotional tool

By reaching large viewing audiences, VNRs can effectively augment advertising campaigns. Primary and secondary target audiences can be reached through newscasts. In addition, television stations lend third-person credibility to VNR packages aired during the newscast. The VNR packages have seemingly been approved by the news media and over half the stations airing VNRs do not identify the source as being any other than the station itself, according to the 1992 Nielsen Media Research survey.

This phenomena of VNRs garnering third-person credibility from the news is important to advertising professionals and PR practitioners. Not only are practitioners getting their clients' information to a large number of viewers, but clients are also receiving credibility from the editorial environment surrounding VNR exposure, something that clients may have a difficult time accomplishing through advertising.

Research on VNR credibility is scant. The most work has been done on VNR usage by television stations (Pavlik and Thalhimer 1992, Careless 1988, Davids 1988, et al.). The unique contribution of this paper is its examination at the level of the <u>viewer</u>, rather than at the level of the organization, whether it be the sponsor or news department. Because of the importance of this topic, the

authors of this paper undertook an experiment to test VNR credibility among TV viewers and its possible effect on viewers' memory and attitudes.

Theoretical background

Categorizing VNRs. Where do VNRs "fit" within the larger mosaic of promotional messages aimed at consumers? In a broad sense, firms employ, to varying degrees, two forms of nonpersonal communication. "Advertising" describes communications that are controlled by, identify, and are paid for by a sponsor. "Publicity" describes communications that are not paid for and do not identify a sponsor, but pass through gates maintained by those who control the communication (Wells, Burnett and Moriarty 1992). Video news releases might be considered publicity vehicles, since firms do not have direct control over if or how their VNRs are used by news organizations. Video news releases are usually not identified on-screen as having been produced by a sponsoring firm. However, given the high degree to which they are used by news organizations, according to the 1992 Nielsen Media Research survey, VNRs likewise contain some advertising element; firms, in a de facto sense, are maintaining a large measure of control over the communication.

Balasubramanian (1991) classified as "hybrid messages" those communications which combine elements of advertising and publicity. He suggests hybrid messages are particularly advantageous for firms which use them, since the firm maintains some control over the message while, at the same time, consumers find these messages more credible than more traditional advertising. According to Balasubramanian (1991), sponsors' preferences for communications are highest when the medium and message are largely

inseparable, or when the message itself is effectively packaged as editorial content.

The nature of viewer response. To the extent that viewers find messages in television news broadcasts as conveying more credible information than do advertisements, that higher level of credibility may be transferred to the brand or company featured in the VNR. Such simple associations represent "the automatic connecting of stimulus and response elements as a function of their proximity in time or space" (Thorson 1990, p. 204). This view also represents a point of departure from information-processing theories of advertising response, in that it assumes no conscious or rational operations on the part of the viewer (Thorson 1990).

Hypotheses. Our review of the nature of VNRs, as well as of prior work on simple associations often made by television viewers, led to the following hypotheses:

H1: Viewers assign greater credibility to messages presented through news programming as video news releases (VNRs) than to messages presented as advertising.

H2: Viewers more confidently encode messages presented through VNRs than through advertising, leading to greater recall of VNRs than of advertising.

H3: The greater the level of credibility an individual assigns to news programming, the higher the rate of recall of VNR-based messages.

H4: The short-term memory effects specified in H2 and H3 are not applicable to evaluative judgments. In the case of familiar brands, evaluation will not be affected by exposure to VNR-based messages.

These hypotheses were tested in an experiment, as described next.

Subjects and stimuli

Eighty-one undergraduate students, enrolled in an introductory advertising course, served as subjects for this study in exchange for course credit. Of the 79 subjects who reported their gender, 41 (52%) were female.

The stimulus used was a videotaped portion of a recent local newscast, including two commercials. The bulk of the video was a sportscast, including lead-in comments from the news anchors. Also included was a story on a "lawnmower rodeo" charity event. The two commercials were for Quaker Toasted Oatmeal cereal and the state lottery.

A VNR-based message was developed for purposes of this study. Nick Peters, VP of Operations at Medialink, New York, was contacted and a copy of Medialink's Top-10 VNRs was requested. The researchers received "B-roll" for all but the Disneyland VNR. In deciding which VNR to use as a stimulus, the researchers chose the seventh place VNR celebrating the 25th anniversary of the "Big Mac" sandwich, as they wanted to test VNR credibility with a familiar brand. The researchers employed the help of colleague, Tim Bajkiewicz, to edit the "B-roll" into a 30 second VNR and the researchers wrote copy which read by Bajkiewicz. The VNR was then embedded in the video clip of the local newscast.

The difference between the experimental and control conditions was that in the experimental condition, subjects saw a message about McDonald's and the Big Mac in a VNR format, while subjects in the control condition saw a McDonald's advertisement about the Big Mac special "Meal Deal." The two McDonald's message formats--news story and advertisement--were as closely matched as possible with regard to message length and position within the video

clip. Both were approximately 30 seconds in length and appeared toward the end of the newscast.

Several questionnaire items were developed to measure the level of credibility subjects generally assigned to news broadcasts (included in questionnaire one), the credibility subjects gave to specific messages from the video clip (included in questionnaire two), and the level of viewing involvement subjects reported having with the video clip (included in questionnaire two). The three items tapping the general level of credibility given news broadcasts, and the four items measuring viewing involvement, are shown in Table One:

Table One
Selected Items from the Questionnaires

"News credibility" items (Questionnaire 1):
Most of the information on local newscasts is believable.
(*) I do not believe the things I see and hear on local newscasts.
I find local newscasts to generally be credible.

"Viewing involvement" items (Questionnaire 2):
The sportscast was informative.
I paid attention to the video clip as it was being shown.
Overall, the video clip was entertaining.
I learned something while watching the news and sports stories.

Notes:
All items were judged on a seven-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," and including a "don't know" option.
(*) = reverse coded and scored

The credibility given to specific messages from the video clip was measured with two items. Subjects were asked to "indicate whether you found the messages you saw about the following to be believable or not believable," along a seven-point scale ranging from "not at all believable" to "very believable;"

similarly, subjects were also asked to indicate the degree to which they found each message to be credible or not credible.

Evaluation of companies (including McDonald's) was measured with two items along seven-point scales: the degree to which subjects "have a favorable or unfavorable attitude" toward the companies; and subjects' "evaluation of" the companies. Recall of messages was tapped with two open-ended items--one asking which news and sports stories subjects recalled seeing, and a second asking which advertisements subjects recalled seeing.

Procedure

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions and were told that the purpose of the study was to examine how TV viewers rated newscasts and sportscasts. Consistent with this cover story, a number of questions about viewing habits, local news and sports anchors, and attitudes toward various local media outlets were included in the questionnaires.

In both conditions, subjects heard a brief set of instructions, completed the first questionnaire, watched the video clip, and then completed the second questionnaire. The total time of administration for both conditions was approximately 35 minutes. An overview of the experimental procedure is shown as Figure 1:

Figure One:
Experimental Procedure

Control Group	Experimental Group
* completed Questionnaire 1	* completed Questionnaire 1
* saw video clip: "Quaker Toasted Oatmeal" ad	* saw video clip: "Quaker Toasted Oatmeal" ad

sportscast	sportscast
news story: Lawnmower Rally	VNR
newscast close	newscast close
"McDonald's" ad	"Lottery" ad
"Lottery" ad	
* completed Questionnaire 2	* completed Questionnaire 2

Results

Between-group comparisons. Several comparisons were made between the experimental group (which saw the VNR-based message) and the control group (which saw the ad-based message). First, the two seven-point items measuring the credibility of information seen about McDonald's were summed to form a single 14-point scale. The two-item credibility scale was deemed reliable as scores on the two items were highly correlated (.70). Using this scale, subjects in the experimental condition (mean score = 10.8) rated the McDonald's message as more credible than did subjects in the control condition (mean score = 8.31); this difference was significant ($t = 3.64$, $p<.001$), supporting H1.

Similarly, the two seven-point items tapping global evaluation or attitude toward McDonald's were summed to form one scale. This scale was also deemed reliable due to the high correlation of scores (.78). Subjects in the experimental condition (mean score = 10.83) did not differ in their attitude toward McDonald's from control group subjects (mean score = 10.48), a result consistent with H4.

However, the rate of recall of the McDonald's VNR in the experimental condition (72.5%) was actually lower than the rate of recall of the McDonald's ad in the control condition (87.8%), which does not support H2.

Individual-level measures. In order to test H3, a within-subject analysis was used to test whether the credibility an individual gives to local newscasts

affected his or her recall of VNR-based messages. Using subjects from the experimental condition, a model including both viewing involvement and credibility given newscasts predicted recall ($F = 3.50$, $p < .05$, $r^2 = .17$). Further, the credibility assigned to local newscasts was a itself a significant predictor of VNR recall ($t = 2.39$, $p < .03$); this result supports H3.

Procedural checks. The random assignment procedure appeared to work well, as males and females were distributed evenly across the groups. There was no difference in the attention subjects in the two groups reported giving to the video clip, suggesting that the instructions were interpreted similarly across the groups. The cover story used in the procedure also was effective. All subjects, at the end of the second questionnaire, were asked their opinion of the study and what they thought the study was about; none of the subjects mentioned VNRs, the McDonald's story, or any topic related to the goals of the study.

Discussion

The results of this study add to the ongoing debate over the use of VNRs. While some television directors claim to never use the video packages, the number of VNRs produced, distributed, and aired continues to increase. This situation allows advertising professionals and PR practitioners not only to be able to give their clients exposure, but also place them in a more credible light. As this study showed, viewers do give more credibility to messages within news programs than to advertising messages, and, on an individual basis, the credibility assigned to news broadcasts significantly impacts the recall of VNRs in those broadcasts.

As is the case with any study, the results presented here are subject to a number of limitations. Our sample of college students is in no way a representation of most television news viewers. Further, the environment in which the subjects saw the newscast is far removed from a typical viewing environment. However, many of these limitations likely played a role in muting, rather than amplifying, any potential effects from VNR exposure.

The subjects in this study were relatively sophisticated viewers--at least of advertising--and saw an abbreviated video clip in a forced viewing situation. The subject of the VNR was a very familiar company which most viewers would find already memorable. Taken together, these factors likely led to a higher level of attention paid to advertisements shown during the newscast than would be the case in a more natural viewing situation and therefore may have served to inhibit differences between the two groups. Even so, a significant difference was found in the credibility assigned to VNR-based messages over advertising, and the level of credibility assigned to television news in general was found to be a significant predictor of the recall of VNR-based messages.

The difference between groups may be more pronounced in scenarios involving less sophisticated viewers, less focal attention paid to television, and/or brands or products which viewers know little about. For example, two of Medialink's Top 10 VNRs, the fusion energy VNR and the diabetes study VNR, represent products that most viewers will know little about. In such a setting, higher recall for VNR-based messages over advertisements may be found. The results of the present study certainly lend themselves to further testing and extension. The researchers hope they have shown that the viewer should be a prime topic for future research in VNRs.

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